DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 023 067 AL 001 366

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Style in Swahili.
Pub Date Mar 67
Note-7p.
Available from-Institute o f Swahili Research, P O Box 9184, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
Journal Cit-Swahili: Journal of the Institute of Swahili Research; v37 n1 Mar 1967
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.45
Descriptors-*Composition (Literary), Composition Skills (Literary), *Interference (Language Learning), *Language Styles, Literary Analysis, *Swahili, Syntax

The purpose of this article is to suggest that there are standards of style in Swahili which every writer, whatever his ethnic origin, should be expected to observe. The changing linguistic situation does not give to any writer freedom to write in Swahili without regard to established standards. There is such a thing as style in Swahili. Knowledge of Swahili vocabulary is not by itself evidence that an African can write with good style in Swahili. Some Africans, even today when there is a turning-away from Arabic borrowings, like to employ Arabic words in order to convince their readers of their knowledge of Swahili. Such words of Arabic origin are sometimes employed where the Swahilis themselves would prefer the Bantu equivalent, if there is one. Some African writers have a good understanding of Swahili grammar, but very little idea as to how in fact the Swahili people express themselves. A sentence may be grammatically correct, but still be unacceptable, because the phrasing or syntax is not according to Swahili practice. (The author comments on two Swahili narratives which depart from normal Swahili usage) (Author/AMM)

Vol. 37/1 March, 1967

SWAHILI

JOURNAL OF THE
INSTITUTE OF SWAHILI RESEARCH
University College
Dar es Salaam

Jarida la Chuo cha Uchunguzi wa Lugha ya Kiswahili

Editor:
W. H. WHITELEY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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Shs. 12/50

Published by the Institute of Swahili Research, P.O. Box 9184, Dar es Salaam and Printed by Printpak Tanzania Ltd. P.O. Box 9033, Dar es Salaam.

ED023067

AL 001 366

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTIONS

This Journal is published twice a year in March and September. Contributions for any issue, which should not in general exceed 15,000 words, may be written in Swahili, English, French or German, and should be submitted not later than 15th November or 15th May in any year, and should be addressed to:—

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Institute of Swahili Research,
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STYLE IN SWAHILI

by

Lyndon Harries

The Swahili language is now undergoing a process of linguistic expansion unparalleled in its long history. Whereas previously the language expressed the Swahili way of life, including the assimilation of much that was Arabic, today the language has a much wider field of reference. At first it was sufficient for the language to represent the interests, belief and occupations of a comparatively small number of East Africans living on the coast. Later the language had a wider geographical spread on the mainland, but not, in colonial times, necessarily a very marked linguistic spread in terms of deep linguistic development. With the coming of independence, and particularly with the decision to make Swahili the national language of Tanzania, the language entered an unprecedented phase of immediate expansion in the deepest and widest sense. The Swahili language no longer reflects only Swahili culture. Now the language is being adapted for use in an international context; ideas and interests which are not part of Swahili life in the traditional sense now begin to find linguistic expression in the Swahili language.

In the present fluid changing state of the language, some African writers experiment with Swahili even though Swahili is for them a second language. They strive to use the language in what they believe to be true Swahili fashion, even though they may have no direct or prolonged experience of coastal Swahili. It is more or less taken for granted that any *Mzungu* who presumes to attempt translation from English into Swahili is bound to make mistakes. When, however, a mainland African, say a Zigua or a Sukuma, writes in Swahili, even though Swahili is not his mother-tongue, there is amongst the majority no natural prejudice against his doing so. Swahili is considered an African language, as indeed it is, so that the Swahili employed by any African is given prestige belonging to a peculiarly African activity.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that there are standards of style in Swahili which every writer, whatever his ethnic origin, should be expected to observe. The changing linguistic situation does not give to any writer freedom to write in Swahili without regard to established standards. There *is* such a thing as style in Swahili. Knowledge of Swahili vocabulary is not by itself evidence that an African can write with good style in Swahili. Some Africans, even today when there is a turning-away from Arabic borrowings, like to employ Arabic words in order to convince their readers of their knowledge of Swahili. Such words of Arabic origin are sometimes employed where the Swahilis themselves would prefer the Bantu equivalent, if there is one. Some African writers have a good understanding of Swahili grammar, but very little idea as to how in fact the Swahili people express themselves. A sentence may be grammatically correct, but still be unacceptable, because the phrasing or syntax is not according to Swahili practice.

In the current number of *Swahili* (Vol. 36/1, March, 1966) there are two narratives, one by George Mhina and the other by Paul Ugula, which depart so far from normal Swahili usage that the texts must not be allowed to appear without comment. So far as I can tell these narratives do not represent the speech of any group or community of East Africans today, nor are they representative of any former texts published with the approval of the East Africa Swahili Committee or, formerly, of the Inter-territorial Language Committe. There can be little doubt that if these narratives had in earlier days been submitted to the Inter-territorial Language Committee they would not have received the approval of the Committee. It is not the intention of the writer of this article to condemn the narratives under consideration. On the comparative level the narratives are of much interest because they illustrate how Africans for whom Swahili is a second language are trying to manipulate the language, but as illustrative material in acceptable Swahili they fail on many counts. It is not clear why in fact these texts were published at all in this journal, unless the editors regarded them as bait to hook at least some tiny fish, like this present article.

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Before considering sentences from each of these narratives, it is necessary to affirm that there may be more ways than one of expressing in Swahili any given meaning. It is admitted that modern writers in Swahili must be allowed considerable licence of expression. We have to distinguish between the content or subject-matter and the manner of its expression. Even if the subject-matter is completely foreign to Africa, the manner of expressing it should be recognisably and linguistically the Swahili manner. Vocabulary will be modified, of course, but the basic structure of the language will remain the same. If it does not remain the same, then this must be the subject of special comment. The subject-matter of these narratives is not foreign at all. The writers had the initial advantage of dealing with contexts which are basically indigenous. It is the manner of expression, the Swahili style of these texts, which calls for comment. No doubt both the editors and readers of *Swahili* would prefer to see such comment coming from a Swahili source, but Swahili reaction to deviant Swahili usage is usually quite negative, at least in print, for the Swahili people see their language so often in unfamiliar garb that they have long since given up doing anything about it. Even so, something ought to be done about it. In European countries distinguished academies have been set up to influence the users of a given language to attempt the achievement of good style, and if not accademies, then committees have met and distinguished authors have written for the same purpose. There is a great need in East Africa today for some authoritative body, amply financed, to direct the development of Swahili usage especially with reference to the use of good style.

Without going into detailed comment from start to finish of the texts under consideration, it may suffice to take some specimen sentences. Before this, however, it is interesting to note how Mr. Mhina likes to employ such an expression as *Waswahili hunena*, the Swahilis say, to introduce a Swahili proverb or saying. In some instances the proverb quoted is not a Swahili proverb at all. For instance on p. 16 he quotes the proverb: *Avaaye kiatu ndiye ajuaye msumari uchomapo*. This of course, is something the Swahilis never say, and is in fact a Swahili translation of the English proverb, "Who wears the shoe knows where it pinches". The true Swahili equivalent is: *Adhabu ya kaburi ajua maiti*. If Swahili sayings are quoted, then they should be quoted correctly. On page 15 the version: *Zaliwa uyaone ya ulimwengu* is incorrect, for the Swahili proverb is: *Ishi uone ya ulimwengu*. This may seem a minor criticism, but such simple misuse of well-known Swahili sayings immediately establishes the writer in the category of those for whom Swahili is to a large extent a foreign language. Note the following sentences by Mr. Mhina:

(1) *...twakabiliwa na matatizo... ambayo inatupasa kuyapiga vita.*

If *matatizo* is used for "problems", then the usual way of expressing the English concept of "fighting problems" is to use *-tatua*. If Swahili expressions are used which are grammatically correct, but which are literal equivalents of the English, then this is something new and needs at least some verification in general usage. As long as we realize that this is linguistic experimentation, and not established use, no great harm is done.

(2) *...mpaka punde hivi najiona nipo katika moshi mzito wa haja unaonifanya nisiwe na hali ya kupumua.*

The key word here is *haja* "need". The writer is explaining that he needs a good, durable wife. He chooses to use a simile, but is it appropriate? Is the expression *moshi mzito wa haja* really meaningful? Can the idea of needing someone badly ever be related to the inability to get one's breath? One could say, "I need someone so much that I could die". But does anyone anywhere say, "I need a wife so badly that I am in a state of breathlessness?" Aristotle, in his Essays on Rhetoric, warned his students against writers who give the appearance of writing in ordered process. I am reminded of this by much that Mr. Mhina writes. He provides the appearance of ordered writing, but on examination much of what he writes is a cloud of words which, even if it does not leave us breathless, prevents us from

seeing the simple meaning. Incidentally, the use of *moshi* in such a context would normally be associated with not being able to see, rather than with not being able to breathe.

(3) *...nimekwisha pata kuoa wake wasiozidi au kama kupungua nane.*

Here, as elsewhere, the grammar is certainly at fault. Either of the words *pata* or *kwisha* is redundant. One should write either *nimekwisha oa* or *nimepata kuoa*, but not *nimekwisha pata kuoa*. The expression in English "neither more nor less" has influenced the writer to compose a sentence quite unacceptable in Swahili. What is the grammatical function of *kama?* Is the English expression appropriate here? Would not the sentence "I have married at least eight women" be more appropriate? The context does not all for emphasis on the possibility that there might have been more than eight. This gives rise to the interesting consideration that when we talk about the influence of English on Swahili, we may have to distinguish between the influence of good and bad English on the language. A Swahili would accept the sentence: *Nimekwisha oa wake wasiopungua wanane.*

(4) *...je, hili si jambo la kushangaza, kwani kwa kawaida yetu mtu amezidi sana aambiwa kuwa yeye anao wake wanne.*

This is a clumsy sentence, and the grammatical acceptability of *...amezidi sana aambiwa..* is highly suspect. Compare the following:

...kwetu mtu haoi zaidi ya wake wanne na akizidi hapo watu humstaajabia.

(5) *...ilikuwa ni desturi mtoto wa kiume au wa kike anapozaliwa tu kwa wazazi kuanza kumtafutia mchumba.*

The structure of this sentence can be criticized on grounds of style, and one suspects English influence again. In English one could say: "It was the custom as soon as a child is born for the parents to look for a sweetheart for it". Note the position of preposition "for" in this sentence which corresponds with Mr. Mhina's version. The parenthetical use of "as soon as a child is born" is permissible in English followed by the preposition "for", but such parenthesis is not usual in Swahili. As Mr. Mhina's sentence stands *desturi* relates primarily to the child, not to the parents. It is possible to insert *kwa* after *desturi* in Mr. Mhina's sentence. Compare the following:

...ilikuwa ni desturi kwa mtoto mara akizaliwa wazazi humtafutia mchumba.

Here *kwa* can be, and usually is omitted.

Alternatively, *desturi* can relate primarily to the parents, in which case we would have the following sentence:

...ilikuwa ni desturi kwa wazazi kumtafutia mtoto wao mchumba mara mtoto akizaliwa.

But it is unacceptable to mix these constructions with a sentence like the following which corresponds with what Mr. Mhina has written:

...ilikuwa ni desturi kwa mtoto mara akizaliwa kwa wazazi wake kumtafutia mchumba.

If we omit the first *kwa*, as Mr. Mhina has done, we get a permissible sentence since it is basically the same as in the sentence in which *desturi* relates primarily to the parents, but it is still less preferable than the first of these examples. These are matters of style. The construction *anapozaliwa tu* is, of course, unacceptable for the misuse of the adverbial *tu*.

These are a few examples on which I have made some comments, and it would take more time than I can spare to deal adequately with Mr. Mhina's text. But before

going on to some examples from Mr. Ugula's text, perhaps your readers would consider the following involved sentence, for the most part ungrammatical, from the Mhina narrative:

Walivyokuwa wanafanya wazee ni kuwa wali hawa wachanga bila fahamu zao kuwa wameoana hukabidhiwa kwa babu na bibi wamojawapo ikiwa kwa upande wa bwana au kwa upande wa mke. (Page 16).

Is this Swahili? Is this representative of the national language of Tanzania?

Mr. Ugula's text is equally subject to critisism for his misuse of words, faulty grammar and generally unacceptable style. Almost every sentence invites comment. For example, on p 46 we find:

(1) ...*watu wengi mashuhuri wametokana mahali pasipothaminika.*

Apart from the fact that *wametokana* is wrongly used, the meaning the author intends to give to *pasipothaminika* is quite the opposite of its actual meaning. He means to say that many famous people have come from a place of no value i.e. no importance, *mahali duni*. But the meaning of *pasipothaminika* is 'an invaluable place', i.e. its worth or value cannot be estimated because it is so great. Is this another example of wrong understanding of English or of Swahili?
Note the wrong use of *licha:*

(2) (*Kijiji chetu*) *hakijulikani, licha ya ulimwenguni bali hata Tanganyika.*

In English one may say: Our village is not known to the outside world, let alone in our own country Tanganyika. This is what the author intends to say, and it could be said in Swahili as follows: *Kijiji chetu hakijulikani ulimwenguni hata huku kwetu Tanganyika.* But if *licha* is used, then the lesser reference must come first. It would be more correct to say: *Kijiji chetu hakijulikani huku kwetu Tanganyika, sembuse ulimwenguni*, or, *Kijiji chetu hakijulikani , licha ya Tanganyika bali hata ulimwenguni.*

(3) What are we to make of these sequent sentence?:

Kando ya raha na marafiki nipatao katika nchi ngeni moyoni huwa hapana furaha. Hukumbuka tu kwetu.

To the author the English "besides" is reminiscent of the Swahili word *kando* which, of course, does not mean "besides", but "side, on the side", and so *kando* is wrongly used. The rest of the sentence is permissible grammatically, but fails in style. Then the habitual *hu-* tense is used in a way that indicates that the author is unfamiliar with its proper uses. If the *hu-* tense is employed the subject must be indicated, e.g. *Mimi hukumbuka.*

It would be invidious to continue any detailed analysis of the sentences in Mr. Ugula's text, because continued criticism, however justified, can only have a depressing effect, not only on Mr. Ugula, but on your readers as well. What we have written may suffice to indicate that a knowledge of Swahili vocabulary, even when such knowledge is sound, is not by itself any guarantee that it can be properly used. Neither Mr. Mhina nor Mr. Ugula would expect a Swahili with a knowledge of the vocabulary of their own tribal languages to use their language properly unless he had lived for a long time amongst their own people and assimilated the style of their language. The fact that non-Swahili Africans may actually live on the coast does not necessarily imply that their circumstances fit them to use Swahili in the Swahili manner. It depends largely upon with whom they are living. Most non-Swahilis pick up their Swahili from other non-Swahilis, and so we have a vicious circle which may one day be broken by the evolution of recognised forms of the language which are different from standard Swahili. But until then we do have a generally recognised standard form of the language based on recognised speech behaviour which acts as a check and a guide for those, like Mr. Mhina and Mr. Ugula, who want to write in acceptable Swahili.

If it is suggested that the Swahili they employ is acceptable to their readers, but not to me, this would have to be established by providing other texts where similar deviants are employed. Some of the deviants can be so identified on the comparative level, but for the majority of deviant forms in the texts we have considered no other examples exist, and for this we should be extremely grateful. In my opinion the texts do not represent normal development in Swahili, but typify the kind of bad style which needs to be corrected by a return to standard usage.